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ABSTRACT

How infants and toddlers become skilled social actors has not been examined as often as the peer interactions of older children. This study examined 24, middle-class toddlers (ages 23 to 33 months) in 9 different settings during their free-play time at a university-cooperative nursery school. Researchers analyzed 150 social bids which were either toddler initiated or teacher facilitated. Social bids ranged in length from 30 seconds to 5 minutes. The 18 strategies toddlers used in their bids were collapsed into 3 categories: (1) distal contact (staring at peer play from a distance greater than three feet away); (2) proximal contact (touching a peer or leaning over next to a peer); and (3) verbalizing. Of the 150 events, 49 percent were nonverbal contacts and 51 percent were verbal bids. Half the toddlers used only one strategy to attain peer interaction, while half used from two to six sequenced strategies. In 46 percent of the events, the toddler physically left the area, while 34 percent of the time toddlers ended the interaction without leaving the area. Most toddler bids for social peer interactions were unsuccessful and teachers only attempted to assist in 15 percent of the cases. Care givers may need more training to notice toddlers' ineffective social bids and to find creative, minimally intrusive ways, to facilitate toddlers' social interaction. (Author/RJM)

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TODDLER STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH PEERS[1]

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Running head: Toddler social engagements

[1]Poster presented at the Eighth Biennial National Training Institute of the National Center for Clinical Infant Programs, Washington, DC., December, 1993.

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Abstract

Event sampling with 24 middle-class toddlers (1 year 11 months to 2 years 9 months) during free play in nine settings in a university-based nursery school, revealed that the mean length of a social bid was one minute and 21 seconds. Of the 150 toddler bids for social engagement, 49% were nonverbal contacts and 51% were verbal bids. Half the toddlers used only one strategy to attain a peer interaction, while half used from two to six sequenced strategies. In 46% of the events, the toddler physically left the area or (34%) ended the interaction although staying in the area. Most toddler bids for social peer interactions were unsuccessful. Parallel, associative or reciprocal play were rare as outcomes (6%, 5%, and 1%). Of the 261 peer reactions to toddler's initial bids, 38% were acceptance, 12% rejection, and 50% were ignoring. The teacher-toddler ratio was quite high (1 to 3), but teachers only attempted to assist in 15% of the cases. Caregivers may need more training to notice initial ineffective social bids of toddlers and to find creative, minimally intrusive ways to facilitate early toddler attempts at positive social interactions with peers.

Key words: toddlers; peer social interactions

TODDLER STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH PEERS

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Introduction

The mystery of **how** infants and toddlers become skilled social actors with peers within the first few years of life has not been examined as often as peer interactions of preschoolers and older children (Asher & Gottman, 1981; Parten, 1932; Rubin, 1980). Without specific caregiver intervention to shape or facilitate positive peer skills, early inappropriate or inept patterns of social initiatives may continue for some children into the preschool and school age period. Children who are isolates or rejected by their peers tend to exhibit stable patterns of inappropriate social skills (Roopnarine & Honig, 1985). When attempting to enter groups, unpopular children are less likely to be accepted and more likely to be ignored than popular children (Putallaz & Gottman, 1981). Thus, the origins of toddler social competencies with peers needs to be studied at the point when young toddlers begin to initiate social behaviors toward peers (Bronson, 1981; Brownell, 1990; Eckerman, et al., 1975; 1989; Mueller & Brenner, 1977; Ross & Lollis, 1989). What are the initial actions by which toddlers evince a social interest in engaging their peers? Do these actions result in successful, if brief, peer play bouts or are they rejected or ignored? Do initiators lack skills to **continue** a bid so that a brief bid may have no positive social sequelae?

Caregivers are often quite sensitive to preschoolers' needs for help in successful social play (Adcock & Segal, 1983; Paley, 1992; Smilansky,1968; Smilansky & Sheftaya, 1990). Caregivers of older infants need to become more aware of early social ploys and how they can help infants succeed more often in managing positive peer encounters and sustained play bouts, as friendships progress from mutual interest in each other to sharing activities and even humor (Press & Greenspan, 1985).

Social skills begin with infant recognition of the peer as a social partner during the first year of life, then engagement in complementary and reciprocal social interactions during the early toddler period (13-24 months), and finally communication of shared meaning as to the content of the social interaction from 25 to 36 months during the late toddler period (Howes, 1987). Before toddlers learn the subtle skills of how to play peaceably with others, they must first learn successfully how to initiate contacts with a potential playmate. One of the more difficult social skills they need to learn is how to negotiate entry into play with a peer already engaged with other peers. In family life situations, sometimes an older sibling entrains a toddler into play or responds more positively to the role of "big sister" or "big brother" in accepting play bids of a toddler. However, in the world of childcare, playmates are most often at the same developmental level as the toddler. This age similarity may further equality of power in some instances, and possibly more mutually enjoyable goals in interactions. Yet because the toddlers' developmental levels are so similar, the ability to decode peer social signals, to assess others' social needs and goals, and to find ready ways

to engage others so that they are willing to admit a peer into ongoing play requires skills in short supply among toddlers, many of whom are barely out of sensorimotor Piagetian levels of functioning.

This study focused on the techniques that toddlers use in such circumstances, the reactions of peers and teachers to these strategies and the outcomes of the toddler social bids toward peers.

Methods and Procedures

Subjects

Twenty-four middle-class toddlers (ten girls and 14 boys, age range 23 to 33 months, participated in half-day (2 1/2 hour) classrooms twice weekly in a University cooperative nursery school. In each classroom, the toddlers, from multicultural student or professional families, had been together as a group for an average of 11 weeks prior to the onset of data collection. Each classroom includes four adults (a head teacher, two student assistant teachers and a parent assistant). The head teacher in each classroom is a highly trained (master's level) Child Development specialist.

The toddler program is based on a Constructivist philosophy. The role of the adults is to support and facilitate each child's interaction with the physical and social environment. Toddlers select activities of choice from a number of distinct learning areas: dramatic play, sandbox, manipulative table, playscape, easel, library, writing corner, art area, and block area. Some events were tallied at the clean-up sink.

Methods

Event sampling (Bentzen, 1993, p.88) was carried out during free-play time

from 9:AM to 10:30 AM over a period of 13 weeks. The event sampled was the attempt of a toddler to gain entrance to interaction with a peer. Any behavior, whether toddler-initiated or teacher-facilitated, was tallied until 150 events had been recorded. The anecdotal record included the **type of bid** used to gain entrance to the peer group interaction, the **length of an entry bid,** the **number of strategies per bid,** the **reaction** to a bid by the peers or by a caregiver, and **the outcome** of the toddler bid. Inter-observer reliability, computed as percentage of agreements over agreements-plus-disagreements was 89%, and was determined on the basis of preliminary observations in another toddler play program.

The 18 play-entry strategies toddlers used were collapsed into three categories: distal contact (such as staring at peer play from a distance greater than three feet away); proximal contact (such as touching a peer or leaning over next to a peer, within three feet of the peer(s); and verbalizing. Peer responses to toddler play-entry attempts were coded as : accept, reject, or ignore. Adult responses to entry attempts were coded as"present" or "absent" in the varied settings of the play room. The eight outcome behaviors of a peer bid were coded as: imitative play, parallel play, associative play, reciprocal play, adult-present activity, self-comfort, or termination (often the toddler initiating the bid simply left the scene). Inter-rater reliability of 80% agreement in coding the responses was determined on the basis of observations in another toddler program.

Results and Discussion

In 95 of the 150 event samplings recorded in this study, toddlers attempted to gain entrance to an interaction with a single peer (63%). In 55 events (37%), a toddler attempted to gain entrance to a group interaction. The locale of events was distributed over the various areas of the classrooms, with the dramatic play area and the gross-motor playscape having a slightly greater proportion (17% and 13% respectively) of the tallied events than the other areas (see Table 1).

Insert Table 1 about here

Length of Toddler Social Bids

The 150 event samplings recorded ranged in length from thirty seconds to five minutes. The mean length of a toddler social bid was 1 minute, 21 seconds.

Adult presence or facilitation and length of toddler bid. An adult was present in 25 of 95 toddler bids (26%) toward one peer and an adult attempted to facilitate toddler entrance to peer play in 13 of those 25 events (52%). In 23 of 55 events where toddlers attempted to gain entry into group play a caregiver was present. In nine of these 23 events (39%) an adult attempted to facilitate the toddler's bid. Adults, however, were not present in a majority of the episodes and thus only attempted to facilitate peer social interaction in 22 of 150 recorded episodes (15%). When intervention occurred, the role of the caregiver did not significantly improve the mean length of the episode whereby a toddler attempted to gain entry into peer play. Of the

22 events where an adult was present and did attempt to facilitate the toddler's bid, the mean length of the event was 1 minute and 30 seconds. Of the 26 events where a caregiver simply was present but did not intervene, the mean length of toddler bid was 1 minute, 15 seconds. Indeed, despite caregiver warmth and active attempts to promote peer play, sometimes teacher strategies were not accepted by toddlers.

> Paul tells the teacher that he is going to build a castle with blocks. " Why not ask Tony to help you build?', suggests the teacher. Paul accepts the suggestions and calls " Come on over Tony, come over". Paul gets up and walks over to invite Tony, who says that he does not want to build. Tony begins to cry. Paul goes back to the blocks and begins to build by himself.

Adults may need to become more aware of whether toddlers, who are emotionally in Eriksonian stage 2 (Autonomy vs. Shame or Doubt) or the beginnings of Stage 3 (Initiative vs. Guilt) (Erikson, 1950) actually are themselves choosing to engage with a peer or would prefer not to be entrained into an activity the teacher has decided would be "good" for the child's socioemotional development. Teacher "scaffolding" of peer play may need to become more subtly responsive not only to toddler cognitive competence but to the emotional need of toddlers to learn to express their own wishes and make their own choices.

Sometimes adults use minimal input to try to validate the positive quality of one toddler's social bid when the recipient may not be aware of politeness scripts that some social situations require.

> Nuri watches Feng and Hanna playing at the water at the water table. Feng

looks up at her and goes over to give her a flower pot, which she silently takes from him. The caregiver says:" You are giving Nuri the flower pot. Thank you Feng", as he walks back to engage in more water play.

Toddler Strategies

Number of toddler strategies per bid. Toddlers tended to use few strategies in their bids for social engagement. In fifty percent of the events sampled in this study, toddlers attempted to gain social entry with only one strategy. Two to six strategies were used by toddlers during the other 76 events recorded as social initiations (See Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

In 45% of events, two or three strategies were used per bid. The use of four, five, or six strategies was exceedingly rare.

Type of toddler strategy. Of the 150 events sampled, the type of initial strategy toddlers used was : 34% proximal contact, 52% use of language, and 14% distal contact as in the example below:

Joan watches Tanya busy in the housekeeping area as she moves between sink and table with dishes to set the table. Joan smiles and continues to watch Tanya silently.

Some toddlers may wish to engage with a peer in a play activity, but their entry skills are in short supply. So they engage primarily as onlookers. Teacher may need to

model possible bids or strategies that toddlers could use to enter into associative or dramatic play with peers.

Consistency of strategies in a sequence. In 58% of the 44 event samplings where toddlers used a sequence of strategies in their entry bids, the toddlers used congruent strategies, such as one language bid followed by another language bid. In 2 % of the sequences, a distal contact was followed by another distal contact; in 23%, proximal contact was followed by another attempt at proximal contact. Some of the proximal contacts were **reciprocal imitations**:

> Jerry is at one end of a cloth tunnel and Andy is at the other end. Both peer into the tunnel. Jerry moves closer as does Andy. Jerry laughs as Andy moves through the tunnel; then he goes to the same entry to the tunnel where Andy went through, goes through the tunnel just as Andy did, and then moves away.

In 75% of the congruent sequences, a language strategy was followed by another language strategy. Language strategies sometimes were greetings or invitations that did not lead to further peer play:

> Jose approaches the playhouse and Al is inside." It's Jose, it's Jose!", Al greets him in a warm invitation to come in. Jose says "Hi", but then immediately moves off toward the dramatic play area.

It may be difficult for toddlers to interpret verbal social markers as implicit invitations to engage in play together. Teachers may need to make **explicit** the meaning of such rote social markers as "Hi".

> Ari, holding a hat in hand, is at the sand table. He calls over to Jessie at the

other end of the table, "Look at my train". Jessie walks over, looks instead at the hat in Ari's hand, then returns to where he had been standing at the other end of the sand table.

In the other 42% of event samplings (32) with sequences, toddlers varied their strategies (e.g. a distal contact was followed by a proximal contact) in order to gain entry to a peer interaction. For example, a toddler first watched a peer crayoning, then walked over to the art table, and when the peer offered him a red marker wordlessly, the toddler smiled, but then moved off without following through on the peer's bid to join in and color with him.

Kevin joined Carl in the library corner and put pieces of puzzle in a board just as Carl was doing. Kevin began singing "Twinkle, twinkle, little star", and Carl joined in singing imitatively and stayed at the table next to Kevin while continuing to put pieces on the board.

Outcomes of Toddler Social Entry Bids

There were 261 recorded peer responses to toddler social entry bids. Figure 1 shows the distribution of " accept", "reject", and "ignore" responses to toddler peer overtures.

Insert Figure 1 about here

About half (50%) of the peer responses (131) were coded as "ignores toddler bid", as illustrated below.

Cal sits down at the art table where the toddlers are making collages. Rebecca reaches over and hands Cal a circle to paste. Cal does not accept the circle from her but picks one up from the table. Rebecca puts the circle she was offering him down in front of Cal, who continues not to respond. She returns to work on her own collage.

Ignoring a toddler's bid was particularly likely to occur with distal bids: 23 out of 25 distal contacts were ignored by peers , regardless of whether the distal bid was verbal or nonverbal. Some toddlers have not yet learned to recognize a positive social bid from a peer. They may need adult facilitation in order to recognize cognitively a social category such as " Peer offering help as a way of inviting you to join in social activity together". In other social bids for entry, the meaning of a toddler's bid may not be clear to the peer, and a teacher's help may be necessary in order to clarify that the message of a toddler's action was a request to engage in joint play.

Harry was sitting on the bed of a wooden toy truck, ready to locomote in the truck. Noticing this, Natalie brought over a doll from the dramatic play area and placed her doll on the truck behind Harry so that he could take her doll for a ride. Harry moved forward on the truck; the doll fell off. Natalie silently took it back to the bed in the dramatic area.

A teacher who could cheerfully give words to Natalie's wordless request might have facilitated peer play between the toddlers.

Of the peer responses, 38% (98) were acceptances of the toddler's social bid. For example, Tina offered her hand to another toddler coming up the playscape steps.

The peer accepted her hand, climbed up the steps and then sailed down the slide.

> Chino and Kaye are at the stove and sink. Benjy goes to the table in the housekeeping area and announces: " It's dinner time" as he sits down. While taking items from the toy refrigerator back to Benjy at the table, Kaye asks: "It's dinner time, Benjy?" Benjy then walks away to the bean bags in the block area, while affirming " It's dinner time".

The above episode illustrates that some toddlers have learned **effective** ways, sometimes perhaps through the use of a verbal stereotypic comment, in which to gain entry into group peer play. Nevertheless, they have not yet learned effective strategies to maintain play bouts or to sustain an initial successful social bid. There were 32 rejections (11%), as illustrated in the example below.

> Seated in the sandbox, Ari leaned over to Amy, who was holding several spoons in her hand, and requested of her: " I need a spoon". Amy clutched the spoons without replying. After he had moved to play in another part of the sandbox, Amy went back to digging in the sand with the spoons.

Implications for Teacher Strategies

The importance of an adult as a facilitator of toddler initiation bids is revealed in the data on toddler endings to their bids. How did the toddlers end their social bids? Table 3 shows that in almost half (46%) of the events, a toddler ended the interaction with a peer by leaving the area and in 34% of the events the toddler remained in the area but ended the bid. Associative and reciprocal play were rare outcomes of the initiation bid (5% and 1% respectively of events tallied).

Insert Table 3 about here

Teachers may need to **model** simple actions or words that can extend peer play bouts. They can respond to non-verbal body messages of toddlers who are attempting a social entry. Such helpfulness might advance the success of toddlers trying to engage in peer play without the skills to do so successfully. Particularly, the technique of "talking for the body of the babv" may work well. For example, in the episode above with Natalie and Harry, the teacher may have noted: " Oh Harry, you are such a good truck driver. Natalie would like you to take her baby for a gentle ride. Her baby doesn't like to get bounced around too much. Natalie really wishes you would give her baby a special ride in your truck." Teachers who **reflect toddler wishes and intentions in words** promote toddler language skills as well as social play-entry skills.

Teachers may also have to **decode** the meaning of an ineffective toddler bid and help a toddler find a more effective way to her social goal. For example, Anne waved her drawing in front of Luella's face. Luella withdrew from the contact. Anne did not know how to get her peer's social attention through a more acceptable bid.

When teachers **create simple scenarios** or arrange an interesting activity and invite toddlers to join in, toddlers' mutual interests may more naturally enhance their chances of positive social engagement and peer interactions. This use of the " Magic Triangle" technique (Honig, 1982), where the event or activity rather than a person is

the focus of the interaction, may prove a more successful strategy for encouraging toddler peer social initiatives than direct suggestions to a toddler that a peer be invited into play. Toddlers need to feel that they are in control in managing their social lives as they are beginning to gain control in communicating with words and as they are beginning to gain control over sphincters in toilet learning. Caregivers who are sensitive to toddler development in language and motoric skills need also to think creatively about meeting the challenge to enhance peer social entry skills.

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Table 1

Frequency and Percent of Event by Area of the Classroom

	Toddler Social Bid	
Area of the Classroom	Frequency	Percent
Dramatic	25	17%
Sandbox	16	11%
Manipulative	18	12%
Playscape	19	13%
Easel	8	5%
Library	11	7%
Writing	17	11%
Art	8	5%
Block	17	11%
Other	11	7%

Table 2

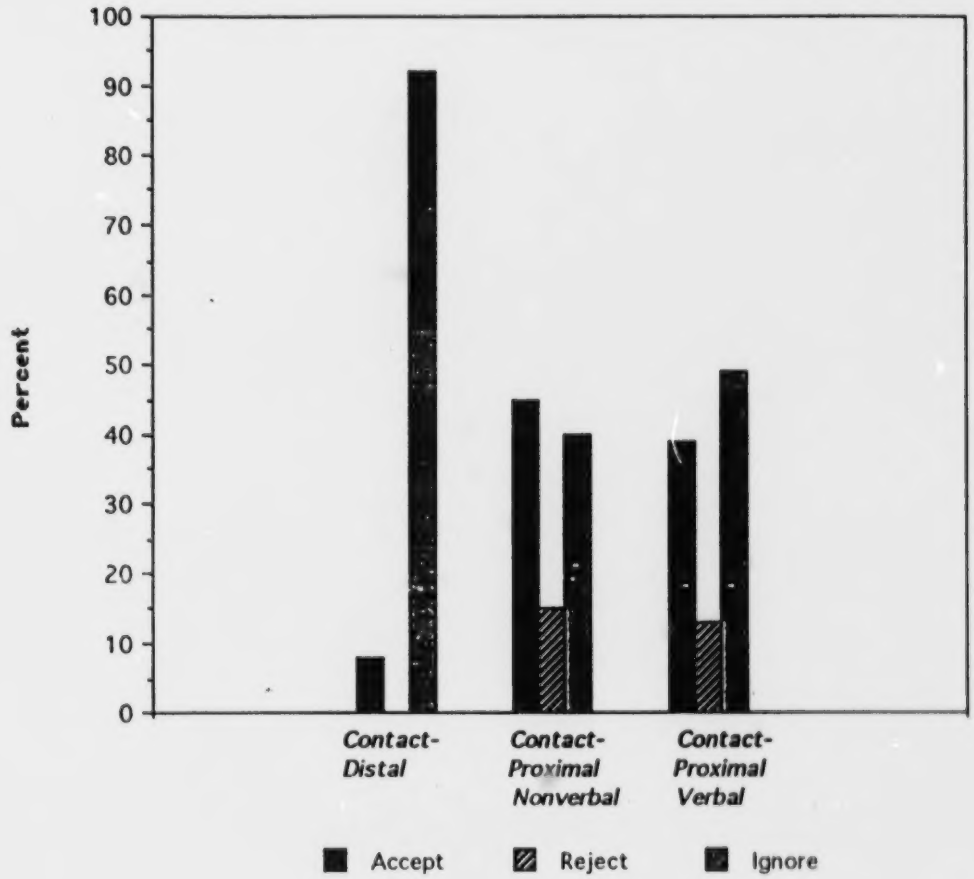
Frequency and Percent of Event by Number of Toddler Strategies

	Event	
Number of Strategies Toddlers Used to Engage a Peer	Frequency	Percent
1	74	49%
2	51	34%
3	16	11%
4	7	5%
5	1	
6	1	

Table 3

Frequency and Percent of Event by Outcome

Outcome of Toddler Bid for Interaction with Peer	Event	
	Frequency	Percent
Leaves	69	46%
Ends	51	34%
Imitative	7	5%
Parallel	9	6%
Associative	8	5%
Reciprocal	2	1%
Adult	4	3%
Self-Comfort	0	0%



Peer - Group Reactions